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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL VISIT TO HO CHI MINH CITY

¶1. (U) Summary: On August 5-8, Ambassador Marine paid farewell calls on Ho Chi Minh City's political, economic and religious leaders, noting significant progress in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship and highlighting possible areas for improvement. During his visit, the Ambassador met with HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Hoang Quan, political activist Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Catholic Cardinal Pham Minh Man, representatives from the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), and a group of house church pastors. He also spoke about reform challenges in Vietnam's higher education system at the University of Hawaii's Shidler School of Business Executive MBA program in Ho Chi Minh City, met with members of AMCHAM and visited a PEPFAR-funded legal HIV/AIDS Clinic. The Ambassador's visit, which included a press roundtable, received broad and positive coverage from the Vietnamese media. Meetings with Dr. Que and religious representatives reported in septels. End Summary.

Ho Chi Minh City'S MODEL ECONOMY

¶2. (SBU) During his farewell call on HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Hoang Quan, Ambassador Marine said he could see Ho Chi Minh City's rising economic success through the changes on the city streets during his time in Vietnam. He praised the People's Committee for its role in creating a business environment that facilitates fast-paced economic growth, setting the standard against which all other urban centers in Vietnam are measured. He encouraged the People's Committee to find ways to share Ho Chi Minh City's successful model with other parts of Vietnam. The Ambassador stressed the USG stands ready to assist the GVN to make progress on transparency, governance and rule of law issues, which would create a more predictable commercial and investment environment in Vietnam. Chairman Quan thanked the Ambassador for his efforts to improve ties between the United States and Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

¶3. (SBU) In response to points raised by the Ambassador, Chairman Quan said that the growing trade deficit could be linked to the high cost of American products. Although the products are high quality, Vietnam can often purchase American products from a third-country at a cheaper rate than buying direct. Chairman Quan suggested that Vietnam would like to establish a food quality control center to assure that its food exports are of the highest quality.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

¶4. (SBU) Reinforcing points made during his meeting with President Triet July 31, Ambassador Marine said the USG is prepared to engage more fully with the GVN on establishing a Peace Corps program to improve English language teaching in Vietnam and strengthening law enforcement cooperation. He added, however, that we need a firm commitment from central and provincial GVN leadership before we can begin providing funding

and programming for such efforts. Echoing comments from President Triet, Chairman Quan said the GVN is ready to implement a Peace Corps agreement and stands ready to finalize details of the program. He indicated the GVN was also willing to enhance law enforcement cooperation to fight burgeoning crime and social problems.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador praised HCMC's leaders for their outstanding partnership in the joint fight against HIV/AIDS, but urged more progress in granting permits for non-governmental and religious organizations to assist people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA's). Chairman Quan said that NGOs and religious groups are allowed to provide social services. He added, however, that the government carefully considers the skill sets of organizations offering assistance when approving requests and fears opening too many clinics would promote the false impression of an AIDS epidemic in Vietnam.

16. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that, despite progress the GVN has made on freedom of religion, there remain strong differences between the USG and GVN's approach to human rights and that in order to maintain a close bilateral relationship, the GVN needs to show significant improvements in its human rights policy. One way the GVN could demonstrate its commitment to democracy and human rights would be through programs that support rule of law, good governance and anti-corruption in Vietnam. Quan agreed differences of opinion on human rights remain, and encouraged more visits from members of Congress to assess the situation here firsthand.

17. (SBU) Note: One day before the Ambassador's visit, HCMC External Relations Office (ERO) Deputy Director Le Hung Quoc requested a meeting with Consul General Fairfax to discuss the Ambassador's visit. At the meeting, Quoc said it would be inappropriate for the Ambassador to meet with democracy activist Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, People's Committee Chairman Quan, and Party

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Secretary Le Thanh Hai during the same visit. The Consul

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General said that, while he understood GVN sensitivities, this would be Ambassador Marine's last opportunity to meet with key contacts. He also urged GVN to view the Ambassador's contacts with a broad spectrum of individuals as a sign of the deepening of our bilateral relationship. The Consul General promised to relay ERO's concerns to Hanoi, but in an aside with Quoc after the meeting noted that if Ambassador was forced to choose between meeting HCMC leaders and Dr. Que, he would choose Dr. Que. Subsequently, the ConGen was told by ERO that Party Secretary Hai's busy schedule did not permit a meeting, but

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confirmed the Ambassador's farewell call with Chairman Quan.
End Note.

VISIT TO PEPFAR-FUNDED HIV/AIDS LEGAL CLINIC

18. (U) Ambassador Marine toured facilities at the Lawyers' Association of Ho Chi Minh City HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic and met with staff and volunteer peer-counselors living with HIV/AIDS. The clinic staff thanked the Ambassador for his commitment to the prevention of HIV/AIDS in Vietnam, and shared stories of struggles and successes. When asked about their biggest challenges, the staff told Ambassador Marine that they have not received full guidance on the process for supporting PLWHA's because the sub-ordinance of the Law on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control is not yet finished. Staff also said that facilities at the clinic, which opened in January 2007, are already proving too small and under-resourced.

Vietnam's Education Sector: Opportunities for Growth

19. (U) At the University of Hawaii's Shidler School of Business

Executive MBA Program, Ambassador Marine spoke to an audience of students, business people and educators about the challenges of reforming Vietnam's higher education system and opportunities for cooperation with the United States. Citing statistics from the World Bank 2006 World Development Report, he noted that in comparison to other countries in the region, Vietnam is lagging well behind in education. He said Vietnam's key challenges were building a better infrastructure, training more qualified teachers, and generating more high-quality independent research.

The Ambassador highlighted a number of United States universities that have created partnerships with local universities to provide undergraduate and graduate education opportunities in Ho Chi Minh City. He also described the successes of the Fulbright Economic Teaching Program and the Vietnam Education Foundation, and affirmed the desire of the USG to provide curriculum design assistance to the Ministry of Education.

AmCham SHOWS APPRECIATION

¶10. (U) Ambassador Marine met with a group of governors and former chairs of the Ho Chi Minh City branch of AmCham to discuss U.S.-Vietnam relations and share Mission Vietnam's impressions regarding President Triet's recent visit to the United States. He encouraged the organization to continue keeping Mission Vietnam updated on concerns and activities of the U.S. business community and to maintain dialogue with the GVN and the U.S. Congress on the state of the business environment in Vietnam. Local AmCham branch Vice Chair Walter Blocker thanked the Ambassador on behalf of the Ho Chi Minh City business community for his leadership for the past three years and specifically for his support during President Triet's visit to the United States and the APEC summit.

PRESS COVERAGE -- EXCELLENT

¶11. (U) During his final press roundtable in Ho Chi Minh City on August 7, the Ambassador took the opportunity to respond to questions on trade and investment, human rights, and bilateral achievements, including those dealing with Agent Orange/dioxin, HIV/AIDS and education. Ho Chi Minh City print and broadcast media also covered Ambassador Marine's education speech and his visit to the PEPFAR-funded Legal Clinic. At the close of each event, the Ambassador took questions on education, the economy and bilateral relations in general.

¶12. (U) Nine print dailies covered the Ambassador's visit, along with a front-page report by the Saigon Times. In addition, his visit to the Legal Clinic and his farewell meeting with Chairman Le Hoang Quan received primetime news coverage on HTV.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi and cleared by Ambassador Marine.
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